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AUTHOR Kelly, Patricia R.; Farnan, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether the higher-order thinking patterns elicited by a reader response approach would carry over and become part of students' ways of thinking about literature, even in the absence of reader response prompts. Subjects were fourth-grade students (48 in all) in two intact, heterogeneously grouped classrooms in the same elementary school in a medium-sized, middle-class, southwestern community. Both teachers carried out the same reading curriculum: a basal reading program; a literature strand using whole-class sets of tradebooks; a schoolwide storytelling program; and independent reading of self-selected books. As a pretest and posttest, students wrote for 5 minutes to the nonreader response prompt, "Tell me about your book." Over a 12-week period, one teacher proceeded with the regular reading program. The other teacher used reader response prompts in classroom activities approximately twice a week as students read, talked, and wrote about what they had read. Pretest results showed that control and experimental groups evidenced similar concrete, literal thought patterns (using categories developed by Arthur Applebee and based on Piagetian categories of cognitive development). Posttest results showed significant differences between the two groups: while the control group remained fairly consistent with earlier results, the experimental group showed significantly more evidence of higher-order thinking (specifically, Applebee's Category 3--analysis). (SR)

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Patricia R. Kelly
United States International
University
14819 Priscilla St.
San Diego, CA 92129

Nancy Farnan
San Diego State University
5300 Campanile Drive
San Diego, CA 92115

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Running Head: READER RESPONSE APPROACH

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Effects of a Reader Response Approach
on Students' Ways of Thinking About Text

Rosenblatt (1938) is credited with first turning attention from the notion that meaning in literature is something waiting to be plucked from a text to the perspective that meaning is a transaction between a reader and a text. This perspective, known as a reader response approach, has been defined as an approach which encourages, through the use of specific prompts, "readers' personal interactions with text, including interpretation and evaluation, and is governed by readers' perceptions of the text, their personal experience, and prior knowledge" (Farnan & Kelly, 1988, p. 84). Such an approach has been strongly supported by both theory and research (Chase and Hynd, 1987; Probst, 1988b; Rosenblatt, 1985), and its value lies in the challenge it provides to students to move beyond literal recall of information about literature and, instead, to engage in critical and higher-order thinking.

Current understandings about comprehension and learning are shifting our focus from the notion of getting meaning from text to the idea of constructing meaning in literature and other content areas. This shift is evidenced by recent discussions of literature study groups to construct meaning in a social context (Eeds & Wells, 1989), the influence of context on meaning construction (Hynds, 1989), and response-based instruction (Probst, 1988a; Nelas, 1988). In classrooms, reader response assumptions such as the following are becoming increasingly

apparent (Chase and Hynd, 1987, p. 531):

- a. Meaning is not "contained" in the text, but is derived from an interaction between the content and structure of the author's message and the experience and prior knowledge of the reader.
- b. Readers comprehend differently because every reader is culturally and individually unique.
- c. Examining readers' responses to text is more valid than establishing one "correct" interpretation of text meaning.

Clearly, a reader response approach is complementary to current views of reading as a transaction among a reader, a text and a context (New Directions in Reading Instruction, 1988).

The purpose of the current study was to examine the effects, over time, of a reader response approach on students' ways of thinking about text. Specifically, we wanted to know whether the higher-order thinking patterns elicited by a reader response approach would carry over and become part of students' ways of thinking about literature, even in the absence of reader response prompts.

Antecedents of Current Research

In 1978 Applebee reported results of a study in which he asked 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds to respond to the prompt, "Tell me about your book." He concluded that age was related to students' ability to display higher-order thinking skills of analysis and generalization, with analysis occurring only in the 13- and 17-year-olds and generalization occurring only in the 17-year-olds. In a 1988 study, Farnan analyzed fourth-, eighth- and eleventh-

grade students' responses to two reader-response prompts, "What does the story remind you of in your life?" and "Tell whether you liked the story or not, and explain why." She compared these responses with students' responses to the nonreader-response prompt "Tell me about your book." Using categories developed by Applebee (1978) and based on Piagetian categories of cognitive development,

Farnan concluded that prompting students with reader-response prompts resulted in significantly greater use of higher-order thinking skills of analysis and generalization at ages 9, 13 and 17 than when students responded to the nonreader-response prompt, "Tell me about your book," a prompt which resulted in literal retellings of what the students had read. Therefore, it appeared that, unlike in the Applebee study, age was not a factor in students' use of higher-order thinking when they were given the critical, reader-response prompts. Kelly substantiated Farnan's results in a descriptive study (Farnan & Kelly, 1988; Kelly, 1990) in which she found that students as young as third grade displayed use of higher-order thinking in response to reader response prompts similar to those used by Farnan (1988).

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of fourth-grade students in two intact, heterogeneously grouped classrooms in the same elementary school. The school was located in a medium-sized, middle-class,

southwestern community. Both teachers carried out the same reading curriculum, which consisted of the following components: 1) basal reading program, 2) literature strand using whole-class sets of tradebooks, 3) schoolwide storytelling program, and 4) independent reading of self-selected books.

Procedures

The experiment was conducted over a period of twelve weeks, and the study commenced after students had all read a self-selected book. For the pretest, both teachers asked their students to write for five minutes to the nonreader-response prompt, "Tell me about your book." These responses then were collected by the researchers for later analysis.

In the twelve weeks following the pretests, one classroom functioned as an experimental group and one as a control group. In the control group, the classroom teacher proceeded with the aforementioned regular reading program, which did not include specific reader-response activities. In the experimental group, the teacher employed reader-response activities in conjunction with the regular reading program. She used the following reader-response prompts in classroom activities as students read, talked about, and wrote about what they had read: 1) How did the book make you feel? 2) What does the book remind you of in your own life? 3) What stands out in your mind as being important? 4) Did you like what you read? (Tell why!) 5) If you were the author, what would you change in the book? 6) If you were going to tell someone about your book, what three things would be

important for them to know? (Tell why!)

The prompts were used approximately twice a week between March and June of 1989 in class discussions and to prompt written responses which were collected in journals. At the end of twelve weeks, teachers gave the same posttest in both classes following students' readings of self-selected materials; students were again asked to respond in writing to the prompt, "Tell me about your book."

Analysis of Data

Students' responses were coded according to group (pretest, posttest, control or experimental), and responses were analyzed, using Applebee's (1978) categories and scored randomly and independently by two scorers who did not have access to each other's scores nor to the group codings. Interrater reliability was established at 95%. Where disagreement occurred in scoring, a third reader made the final decision.

Results

Pretest results showed that the control and experimental groups evidenced similar concrete, literal thought patterns.

For example, in the control group, only 1 out of 24 students displayed evidence of Applebee's Category 3, analysis. In the experimental group, only 2 students out of 24 displayed evidence of Category 3. All others in both groups responded to the prompt, "Tell me about your book," at levels of thinking indicative of Applebee's Category 2.

On the other hand, posttest analyses showed significant

differences between control and experimental groups. The control group remained fairly consistent with earlier results; only 2 students displayed evidence of Category 3 responses. However, response patterns of the experimental group showed significantly more evidence of Applebee's Category 3 from pretest to posttest; here, 12 of 24 students in the experimental group displayed evidence of Category 3, analysis.

Using a 2-Sample Test of Proportions, which renders a Z-score, the change in the experimental group was found to be significant at the .001 level of confidence ($Z=3.45$).

Student Samples

An examination of students' responses illustrates the development of higher-order thinking which was evidenced in the experimental group. The first two student samples below show, respectively, pre- and posttest samples of one student's work. The last two samples were taken from journals of two different students, journals in which they had written to reader response prompts about what they had read. All samples appear in unedited versions, as they were written by the students.

The following two examples were written to the prompt, "Tell me about your book," a nonreader response prompt. Notice that in the pretest, the student summarized but provided only a literal retelling of what she read. This writing was scored at the level of Concrete Operations

Pretest

OH Honestly Angela

Angela is 5 years old. Her sister Tina is 11 and in 6th grade. She also has a brother named Nathaniel. Angela and Tina walk to school together every day. One day there mom left them an note. It said, Dear Tina, here are 2 20 dollar bills. I would like you to do the shopping for me after school.

That day after school Tina went and got Angela and together they went to the store. When they got 2 the store Tina met her friend Mellisa. She told Angela to go and do the shopping. Angela told her sister yes.

Angela did not know how to read so instead she took someone elses cart because it looked like the stuf her mom bot. Meanwhile Tina and her brother were invited to go to see the nutcracker with Mellisa.

The posttest, printed below, was written after the student had spent twelve weeks in the experimental group, writing and talking about what she read through use of reader response prompts. It illustrates her movement from providing only literal information to analyzing the text, making cause/effect connections between her subjective reactions and objective realities of the work.

Posttest

6th Grade Can Really Kill You

I love the book I am reading. It is a very funny book.

The way the author is writeing it is what is makeing it funny. He uses alot of adjectives, to discribe it. I am going to try and find more of his books.

It is about a girl named Hellen who is always into some kind of mistuf. Like the first day of school she didn't like her teacher so she went and put toothpaste on her chair. Her teacher was very angry that it happened but she never found out that Hellen did it.

Hellen is always getting into trouble so kids at school nick-named her "bad hellen" and when something went wrong she was always the one to get blamed.

Journal Writing

The following sample was written in a reader response journal to the prompt, "What would you change if you were the author of your book?" Notice that the writer analyzes the text in terms of a criterion which she has established, based on her prior knowledge and experience. She evaluates the story according, in her judgement, to the inappropriateness of its title, and explains why she would change it, a change based on her perceptions of what the story is actually about.

If I were the author of Oh Honestly Angela I would change the name because it isn't realy about angela being honest. It is about alot of diffrent things. I This book the title makes It seem like Angela is the star but when you read It she really isa'nt.

If I got to pick the name I would make It something

like, "What being the oldest is really like," because that tells more about the book. I think that because Tina who is Angela's sister is just as good as her and They both have alot of lines.

Oh Honestly Angela was written by Nancy K. Robinson.

This book is very interesting and I think every body would like it even adults.

"What does the story remind you of in your own life" is the prompt which directed the writing of the next student sample. This is a reader response prompt which asks the student to tie directly his/her previous knowledge and experience to a reading. Notice that not only does the student relate personal experience relevant to the story, he also makes direct comparisons between the story and his own life. In addition, he attempts to explain the story's humor through a short example.

In this book it reminds me of my home because the kids in this book fite and so do my sisters and I. When I fite with my sisters my mon and dad usually tell me to stop and when Allisa and milo fite they are also told to stop.

This book is exelent, but it is also very funny. How to be perfect in just 13 days is about a boy named Milo who wants to be perfect but he just dusen't know how. Milo had to were brockly around his neck just so he could be perfect. Milo didnt like the idea one bit but after all he did want 2 be perfect.

Discussion

It appears, based on the changes from pre- to posttest, that over time the use of reader response activities fosters higher-order thinking in fourth-grade students. This occurred even when they were asked on the posttest to respond to a nonreader response prompt, which on the pretest had elicited patterns of literal thinking from almost all students.

Prior to this study, there was evidence to suggest that reader-response prompts would elicit young students' analysis of text beyond concrete, literal retellings (Farnan, 1988; Farnan & Kelly, 1988; Kelly, 1990). The current study seems to suggest that consistent use of reader-response prompts influences students' ways of thinking about text even when nonreader-response prompts are used, causing students to approach a work of literature from a mindset that includes discussing cause-effect relationships, noting correspondence with their own lives, and tying their subjective comments to elements in the work itself.

Fair questions to ask of this, as well as any research endeavor, is "So what? What makes this important?" A primary issue related to this study is that a major goal of education today is to enhance students' higher order cognitive functioning. It appears that a reader response approach provides a methodology that not only elicits students' thinking beyond concrete, literal levels, but also affects, overall, the way they think about what they read.

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